

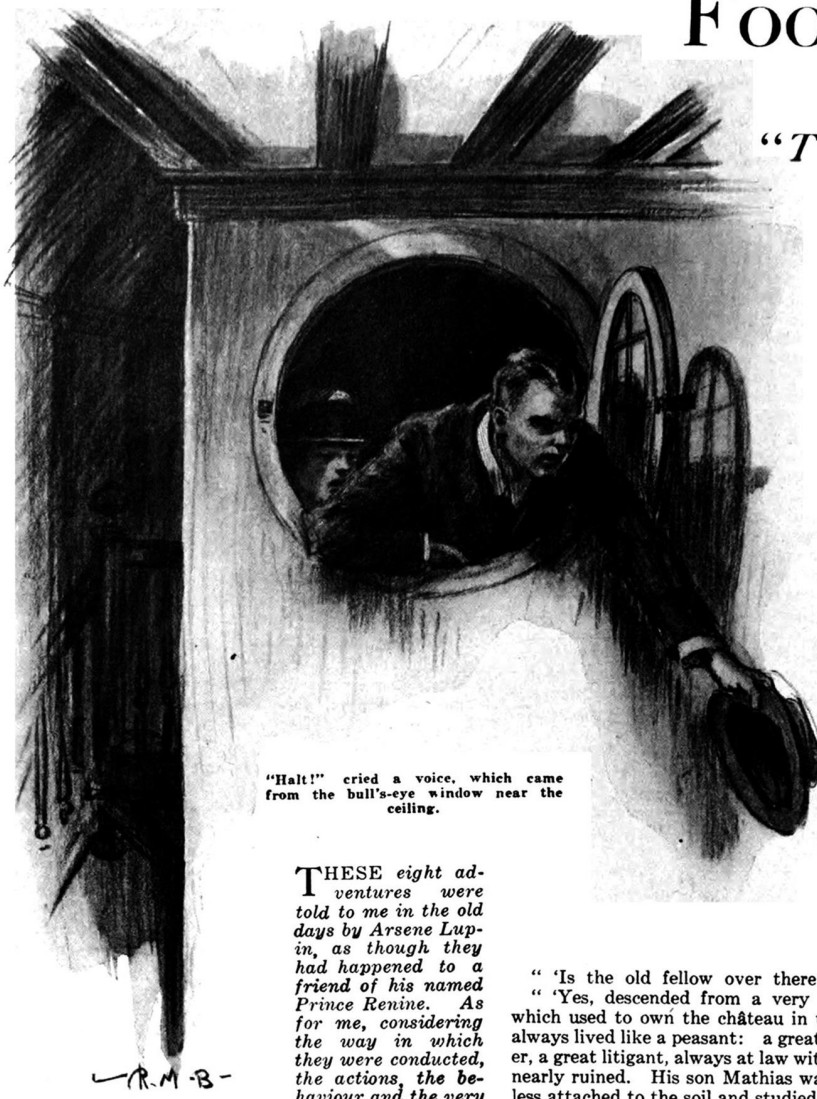
Footprints in the Snow

THE SEVENTH OF

"The Eight Strokes of the Clock"

By MAURICE LEBLANC

ILLUSTRATED BY R. M. BRINKERHOFF



"Halt!" cried a voice, which came from the bull's-eye window near the ceiling.

THESE eight adventures were told to me in the old days by Arsene Lupin, as though they had happened to a friend of his named Prince Renine. As for me, considering the way in which they were conducted, the actions, the behaviour and the very character of the

hero, I find it very difficult not to identify the two friends as one and the same person. Arsene Lupin is gifted with a powerful imagination and is quite capable of attributing to himself adventures which were not his at all, and of disowning those which are really his.—M. L.

TO PRINCE SERGE RENINE,
Boulevard Haussmann,
Paris.

"LA RONCIERE
"near Bassicourt,
"14 November.

"MY DEAR FRIEND:—

"You must be thinking me very ungrateful. I have been here three weeks; and you have not had one letter from me! Not a word of thanks! And yet I ended by realizing from what a terrible death you saved me and understanding the secret of that terrible business! But indeed, indeed I couldn't help it! I was in such a state of prostration after it all! I needed rest and solitude so badly! Was I to stay in Paris? Was I to continue my expeditions with you? No, no, no! I had had enough adventures! Other people's are very interesting, I admit. But when one is one's self the victim and barely escapes with one's life? Oh, my dear friend, how horrible it was! Shall I ever forget it?...

"Here at La Roncière, I enjoy the greatest peace. My old spinster cousin Ermelin pets and coddles me like an invalid. I am getting back my color and am very well, physically... so much so, in fact, that I no longer even think of interesting myself in other people's business. Never again! For instance (I am only telling you this because you are incorrigible, as inquisitive as any old charwoman, and always ready to busy yourself with things that don't concern you), yesterday I was present at a rather curious meeting. Antoinette had taken me to the inn at Bassicourt, where we were having tea in the public room, among the peasants (it was market-day), when the arrival of three people, two men and a woman, caused a sudden pause in the conversation.

"One of the men was a fat farmer in a long blouse, with

"Is the old fellow over there a baron?"
"Yes, descended from a very ancient, noble family, which used to own the château in the old days. He has always lived like a peasant: a great hunter, a great drinker, a great litigant, always at law with somebody, now very nearly ruined. His son Mathias was more ambitious and less attached to the soil and studied for the bar. Then he went to America. Next, the lack of money brought him back to the village, whereupon he fell in love with a young girl in the nearest town. The poor girl consented, now one knows why, to marry him; and for five years past she has been leading the life of a hermit, or rather of a prisoner, in a little manor-house close by, the Manoir-au-Puits, the Well Manor."

"With the father and the son?" I asked.
"No, the father lives at the far end of the village, on a lonely farm."

"And is Master Mathias jealous?"

"A perfect tiger!"

"Without reason?"

"WITHOUT reason, for Natalie de Gorne is the straightest woman in the world and it is not her fault if a handsome young man has been hanging around the manor-house for the past few months. However, the de Gornes can't get over it."

"What, the father neither?"

"The handsome young man is the last descendant of the people who bought the château long ago. This explains old de Gorne's hatred. Jérôme Vignal—I know him and am very fond of him—is a good-looking fellow and very well off; and he has sworn to run off with Natalie de Gorne. It's the old man who says so, whenever he has had a drop too much. There, listen!"

"The old chap was sitting among a group of men who were amusing themselves by making him drink and plying him with questions. He was already a little bit 'on' and was holding forth with a tone of indignation and mocking smile which formed the most comic contrast:

"He's wasting his time, I tell you, the coxcomb! It's no manner of use his poaching round our way and making sheep's-eyes at the wench... The coverts are watched! If he comes too near, it means a bullet, eh, Mathias?"

"He gripped his daughter-in-law's hand:

"And then the little wench knows how to defend herself too," he chuckled. "Eh, you don't want any admirers, do you, Natalie?"

"The young wife blushed, in her confusion at being addressed in these terms, while her husband growled:

"You'd do better to hold your tongue, father. There are things one doesn't talk about in public."

"Things that affect one's honor are best settled in public," retorted the old one. "Where I'm concerned, the honor of the de Gornes comes before everything; and that fine spark, with his Paris airs, sha'n't..."

"He stopped short. Before him stood a man who had just come in and who seemed to be waiting for him to finish his sentence. The newcomer was a tall, powerfully-built young fellow, in riding-kit, with a hunting-crop in his hand. His strong and rather stern face was lighted up by a pair of fine eyes in which shone an ironical smile. "Jérôme Vignal," whispered my cousin.

"The young man seemed not at all embarrassed. On seeing Natalie, he made a low bow; and, when Mathias de Gorne took a step forward, he eyed him from head to foot, as though to say:

"Well, what about it?"

AND his attitude was so haughty and contemptuous that the de Gornes unslung their guns and took them in both hands, like sportsmen about to shoot. The son's expression was very fierce.

"Jérôme was quite unmoved by the threat. After a few seconds, turning to the inn-keeper, he remarked:

"Oh, I say! I came to see old Vasseur. But his shop is shut. Would you mind giving him the holster of my revolver? It wants a stitch or two."

"He handed the holster to the inn-keeper and added, laughing:

"I'm keeping the revolver, in case I need it. You never can tell!"

"Then, still very calmly, he took a cigarette from a silver case, lit it and walked out. We saw him through the window vaulting on his horse and riding off at a slow trot. "Old de Gorne tossed off a glass of brandy, swearing most horribly.

"His son clapped his hand to the old man's mouth and forced him to sit down. Natalie de Gorne was weeping beside them.....

"That's my story, dear friend. As you see, it's not tremendously interesting and does not deserve your attention. There's no mystery in it and no part for you to play. Indeed, I particularly insist that you should not seek a pretext for any untimely interference. Of course, I should be glad to see the poor thing protected; she appears to be a perfect martyr. But, as I said before, let us leave other people to get out of their own troubles and go no farther with our little experiments...."

RENINE finished reading the letter, read it over again and ended by saying:

"That's it. Everybody's right as right can be. She doesn't want to continue our little experiments, because this would make the seventh and because she's afraid of the eighth, which under the terms of our agreement has a very particular significance. She doesn't want to.... and she does want to... without seeming to want to."

He rubbed his hands. The letter was an invaluable witness to the influence which he had gradually, gently and patiently gained over Hortense Daniel. It betrayed a rather complex feeling, composed of admiration, unbounded confidence, uneasiness at times, fear and almost terror, but also love; he was convinced of that. His companion in adventures which she shared with a good fellowship that excluded any awkwardness between them, she had suddenly taken fright; and a sort of modesty, mingled with a certain coquetry, was impelling her to hold back.

That very evening, Sunday, Renine took the train.

And, at break of day, after covering by omnibus, on a road white with snow, the five miles between the little town of Pompignat, where he alighted, and the village of Bassicourt, he learnt that his journey might prove of some use; three shots had been heard during the night in the direction of the Manoir-au-Puits.

"Three shots, sergeant. I heard them as plainly as I see you standing before me," said a peasant whom the gendarmes were questioning in the parlor of the inn which Renine had entered.

"So did I," said the waiter. "Three shots. It may have been twelve o'clock at night. The snow, which had

been falling since nine, had stopped: ... and the shots sounded once over the fields, one after the other: bang, bang, bang."

Five more peasants gave their evidence. The sergeant and his men had heard nothing, because the police-station backed on the fields. But a farm-laborer and a woman arrived, who said that they were in Mathias de Gorne's service, that they had been away for two days because of the intervening Sunday and that they had come straight from the manor-house, where they were unable to obtain admission:

"The gate of the grounds is locked, sergeant," said the man. "It's the first time I've known this to happen. M. Mathias comes out to open it himself, every morning at the stroke of six, winter and summer. Well, it's past eight now. I called and shouted. Nobody answered. So we came on here."

"You might have enquired at old M. de Gorne's," said the sergeant. "He lives on the high-road."

"On my word, so I might! I never thought of that." "We'd better go there now," the sergeant decided.

TWO OF his men went with him, as well as the peasants and a locksmith whose services were called into requisition. Rénine joined the party.

Soon, at the end of the village, they reached old de Gorne's farmyard, which Rénine recognized by Hortense's description of its position.

The old fellow was harnessing his horse and trap. When they told him what had happened, he burst out laughing:

"Three shots? Bang, bang, bang? Why, my dear sergeant, there are only two barrels to Mathias' gun!"

"What about the locked gate?"

"It means that the lad's asleep, that's all. Last night, he came and cracked a bottle with me... perhaps two... or even three; and he'll be sleeping it off, I expect... he and Natalie."

He climbed on to the box of his trap—an old cart with a patched cover—and cracked his whip:

"Good-bye, gentlemen all. Those three shots of yours won't stop me from going to market at Pompignat, as I do every Monday. I've a couple of calves under the cover; and they're just fit for the butcher. Good day to you!"

The others walked on. Rénine went up to the sergeant and gave him his name:

"I'm a friend of Mlle. Ermelin, of La Roncière; and, as it's too early to call on her yet, I shall be glad if you'll allow me to go round by the manor with you. Mlle. Ermelin knows Madame de Gorne; and it will be a satisfaction to me to relieve her mind, for there's nothing wrong at the manor-house, I hope?"

"If there is," replied the sergeant, "we shall read all about it as plainly as on a map, because of the snow."

He was a likable young man and seemed smart and intelligent. From the very first he had shown great acuteness in observing the tracks which Mathias had left behind him, the evening before, on returning home, tracks which soon became confused with the footprints made in going and coming by the farm-laborer and the woman. Meanwhile they came to the walls of a property of which the locksmith readily opened the gate.

From here onward, a single trail appeared upon the spotless snow, that of Mathias; and it was easy to perceive that the son must have shared largely in the father's libations, as the line of footprints described sudden curves which made it swerve right up to the trees of the avenue.

TWO hundred yards farther stood the dilapidated two-storied buildings of the Manoir-au-Puits. The principal door was open.

"Let's go in," said the sergeant.

And, the moment he had crossed the threshold, he muttered:

"O ho! Old de Gorne made a mistake in not coming. They've been fighting in here."

The big room was in disorder. Two shattered chairs, the overturned table and much broken glass and china bore witness to the violence of the struggle. The tall clock, lying on the ground, had stopped at twenty past eleven.

With the farm-girl showing them the way, they ran up to the first floor. Neither Mathias nor his wife was there. But the door of their bedroom had been broken down with a hammer which they discovered under the bed.

Rénine and the sergeant went downstairs again. The living room had a passage communicating with the kitchen which lay at the back of the house and opened on a small yard fenced off from the orchard. At the end of this enclosure was a well near which one was bound to pass.

Now, from the door of the kitchen to the well, the snow, which was not very thick, had been pressed down to this

side and that, as though a body had been dragged over it. And all around the well were tangled traces of trampling feet, showing that the struggle must have been resumed at this spot. The sergeant again discovered Mathias' footprints, together with others which were shapelier and lighter.

These latter went straight into the orchard, by themselves. And, thirty yards on, near the footprints, a revolver was picked up and recognized by one of the peasants as resembling that which Jérôme Vignal had produced in the inn two days before.

The sergeant examined the cylinder. Three of the seven bullets had been fired.

And so the tragedy was little by little reconstructed in its main outlines; and the sergeant, who had ordered everybody to stand aside and not to step on the site of the footprints, came back to the well, leant over, put a few questions to the farm-girl, and, going up to Rénine, whispered,

"It all seems fairly clear to me."

Rénine took his arm.

"Let's speak out plainly, sergeant. I understand the business pretty well, for, as I told you, I know Mlle. Ermelin, who is a friend of Jérôme Vignal's and also knows Madame de Gorne. Do you suppose...?"

"I don't want to suppose anything. I simply declare that some one came there last night..."

"By which way? The only tracks of a person coming towards the manor are those of M. de Gorne."

"That's because the other person arrived before the snowfall, that is to say, before nine o'clock."

"Then he must have hidden in a corner of the living-room and waited for the return of M. de Gorne, who came after the snow?"

"Just so. As soon as Mathias came in, the man went for him. There was a fight. Mathias made his escape through the kitchen. The man ran after him to the well and fired three revolver-shots."

"And where's the body?"

"Down the well."

RENINE protested: "Oh, I say! Aren't you taking a lot for granted?"

"Why sir, the snow's there, to tell the story; and the snow plainly says that, after the struggle, after the three

Continued on page 54



"I'm keeping the revolver, in case I need it. You never can tell!"



How I Earn \$15 to \$25 a Week in my Spare Time

Writing Show Cards at Home
by William S. Coulthard.

I needed money! But I had a lot of time on my hands in the evenings, Saturday afternoons, etc.—for I had no hobby—and besides my expenses had been mounting fast—so you will see the receptive mod I was in when I saw your little ad. "MAKE MONEY AT HOME."

I sent for your free booklet. I read it.

Your plan looked good to me—your guarantee so liberal—and on investigation I found you were reliable, so I accepted your offer. If others could make money by your plan, I could.

That was less than a year ago. Now I am earning \$15.00 to \$25.00 a week, each week, writing show cards in my spare time. In addition to this, I still hold my regular job, and my salary has been increased there too. I believe my spare time work has made me better satisfied with life, and so I'm doing my regular work better.

I have been offered positions writing show cards, but I am not interested, as my present position is perfectly satisfactory, but I certainly am glad I enrolled in your school—my spare time money is exceedingly attractive. Besides, I find show card writing an interesting occupation that fills in those evening hours that used to drag so. In fact, it is really a hobby now with me—and a profitable one, as you can imagine. Only last week I received a check from your school for \$70.00 for work done over the last three weeks. Of course, you'd have paid me regularly each week if I'd bothered about it, but I was too busy to tell you the amount of work I'd finished.

There are times, however, that I feel show card writing by your simple method is almost too good a thing—that's when I have so many orders ahead that I cannot see my way clear to finish them—and have to turn down work. Your system of supplying work to your students has certainly helped me, but sometimes you send too much—I'm only working at it in my spare time, you know. Please note this, and don't try to overload me so much.

By the way, I think you'll be interested to know that previous to enrolling in your school I had never tried my hand at any work of this nature.

I'm glad to thank you for what you've done for me—and you can certainly use my name and tell prospective students, for I feel I'll be doing any one a real good turn if I can help them get started in this profitable work.

Yours sincerely,

WM. S. COULTHARD.

NOTE:—The above is the story of Mr. Coulthard. It tells of facts, for Show Card writing offers a marvelous opportunity to both men and women, either for spare time or full time work. What Mr. Coulthard has done and is doing, you can do. Colbran, Dunsenberry, Wendt, Blade, Poulson, Charles, Wright, Rabineau and many other men have proven it. Mrs. Litherdale, Mrs. Lush, Mrs. Le Moine and dozens of housewives have added to the family income in this way. Girls like Misses MacDonald, Clegg, Bordreau and Hoyle are but a few of those who have bettered their positions in this pleasant way. All these owe their success to the American Show Card School method of training—the old-established school which has trained hundreds to make money in SHOW CARDS.

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she announced, "not yet, for a long time, Clem. I met you here that I might stop you, and that there might be no misunderstanding—and no more secrets."

This last she had certainly secured, for the place which she had chosen for their meeting was overlooked, though at a distance, by the doorway of the house, and by all the walks about it.

BUT HE WAS not to be so put off. "I must see him," he said steadily—and he told himself that he must not be moved by her pleadings. It was natural that she should fear, but he must not fear—and indeed he had passed beyond fear. "No, dear," as she began to protest, "you must let me judge of this." He held her hands firmly in his grasp as he looked at her. "I have suffered enough, I have suffered as much as I can bear. I have had no sight of you and no word of you for months, and I cannot endure that longer. Every hour of every day I have felt myself a coward, a deserter, a do-nothing! I have had to bear this, and I have borne it. But now—now that your father is downstairs—"

"You can still do nothing," she said, "Believe, believe me, you can do nothing. Dear Clement," and the tenderness which she strove to suppress, betrayed itself in her tone, "you must be guided by me, you must indeed. I am with my father and I know, I know that he could not bear it now. I know that it would be cruel to tell him now. He is blind. Blind! And he trusts me, he has to trust me. To tell him now would be to destroy his faith in me, to shock and to frighten him—irreparably. You must go back now, now at once."

"What? And still do nothing? And lose you?" he cried. The pathos of her appeal had passed him by, and only his love and his jealousy spoke.

"No," she answered soberly, "if you have patience."

"But have you patience?"

"I must have."

"And I—I am to do nothing?" he spoke with energy, almost with anger. "To go on doing nothing? I am to stand by and—and play the coward still—go on playing it?"

Her face quivered, for he hurt her. He was selfish, he was cruel; yet she understood, and loved him for his cruelty. But she answered him firmly. "Nothing until I send for you," she said. "You do not think, Clem. He is blind, blind! Think of it! He is dependent on me for everything. If I told him in his weakness that I have deceived him, he would lose faith in me, he would distrust me, he would distrust everyone. He would be alone in his darkness."

It began to come home to him. "Blind?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"But for good? Do you mean—quite blind, Jos?"

"Ah, I don't know!" she cried, unable to control her voice. "I don't know. Farmer does not know, the physician who came from Birmingham to see him does not know. They say that they have hopes—and I don't know! But I fear."

HE WAS silent then, impressed with pity, feeling at length the pathos of it, feeling it almost as she felt it. But after a pause, during which she stood before him watching his face, "And if he does not recover his sight?"

"God forbid!"

"I say God forbid too," he replied, "with all my heart. But if he does not—what then? When may I—"

"When the time comes," she answered, "and of that I must be the judge. Yes, Clement, don't stop me," with resolution. "I must be the judge, for I alone know how he is, and can choose the occasion."

The delay she imposed upon him was very bitter to him. He had ridden out determined to put his fate to the test, to let nothing stand between him and his love, to over-ride excuses; and he could not in a moment make up his mind to be thwarted. "And I must wait? I must go on waiting? Eating my heart out—doing nothing?"

"There is no other way. Indeed, indeed there is not."

"But it is too much. It is too much, Jos, you ask!"

"Then, Clement—"

"Well? Well, Josina?"

"You must give me up," she spoke firmly, but her lips quivered and there were tears in her eyes.

He was silent. At last, "Do you wish me to give you up?" he said cruelly.

She looked at him for answer, and his doubts, if he had doubted her, his distrust, if it had been possible for him to distrust her, vanished. His heart melted.

"Forgive me, oh, forgive me, dear!" he cried. "But mine is a hard task, a bitter task. You do not know what it is to wait, to wait and to do nothing!"

"Do I not?" Her eyes were swimming. "Is it not that which I am doing every day, Clem? But I have faith in you, and I believe in you. I believe that all will come right in the end. If you trust me, as I trust you, and have to trust you—"

"I will, I will," he cried, repentant, remorseful, recognising in her a new decision, a new sweetheart, and doing homage to the strength that trial and suffering had given her. "I will heed you, trust you wholly—and wait."

HERE EYES thanked him, and her hands; and after this there was little more to be said. She was anxious that he should go. They parted. He rode back to Aldersbury.

In the bank he grew more taciturn, doing his business with less spirit than before, suspecting Arthur and avoiding speech with him, meeting his careless smile with a stolid face. His father, Rodd too, deemed him jealous of the new partner, and his father, growing in these days a little sharp in temper, spoke to him about it.

"You took no interest in the business," he said, "and I had to find some one who would take an interest and be of use to me. Now you are making difficulties, and causing unpleasantness. You are behaving ill, Clement."

But Clement only shrugged his shoulders. He had become indifferent. He had his own burden to bear.

To be Continued.

Footprints in the Snow

Continued from page 21

shots, one man alone walked away and left the farm, one man only, and his footprints are not those of Mathias de Gorne. Then where can Mathias de Gorne be?"

"But the well... can be dragged?"

"No. The well is practically bottomless. It is known all over the district and gives its name to the manor."

"So you believe...?"

"I repeat what I said. Before the snow-fall, a single arrival, Mathias, and a single departure, the stranger."

"And Madame de Gorne? Was she too killed and thrown down the well like her husband?"

"No, carried off."

"Carried off?"

"Remember that her bedroom was broken down with a hammer."

"Come, come, sergeant! You yourself declare that there was only one departure, the stranger's."

"Stoop down. Look at the man's footprints. See how they sink into the snow, until they actually touch the ground. Those are the footprints of a man laden

with a heavy burden. The stranger was carrying Madame de Gorne on his shoulder."

"Then there's an outlet this way?"

"Yes, a little door of which Mathias de Gorne always had the key on him. The man must have taken it from him."

"A way out into the open fields?"

"Yes, a road which joins the departmental highway three quarters of a mile from here... And do you know where?"

"Where?"

"At the corner of the château."

"Jérôme Vignal's château?"

"Jérôme Vignal's château."

"By Jove, this is beginning to look serious! If the trail leads to the château and stops there, we shall know where we stand."

THE trail did continue to the château, as they were able to perceive after following it across the undulating fields, on which the snow lay heaped in places. The approach to the main gates had been swept, but they saw that another trail,



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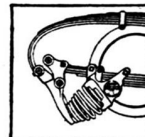
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formed by the two wheels of a vehicle, was running in the opposite direction to the village.

The sergeant rang the bell. The porter, who had also been sweeping the drive, came to the gates, with a broom in his hand. In answer to a question, the man said that M. Vignal had gone away that morning before anyone else was up and that he himself had harnessed the horse to the trap.

"In that case," said Rénine, when they had moved away, "all we have to do is to follow the tracks of the wheels."

"That will be no use," said the sergeant. "They have taken the railway."

"At Pompignat station, where I came from? But they would have passed through the village."

"They have gone just the other way, because it leads to the town, where the express trains stop. The procurator-general has an office in the town. I'll telephone; and, as there's no train before seven o'clock, all that they need do is to keep a watch at the station."

"I think you're doing the right thing, sergeant," said Rénine, "and I congratulate you on the way in which you have carried out your investigation."

They parted. Rénine went back to the inn in the village and sent a note to Hortense Daniel by hand:

"My Very Dear Friend,

"I seemed to gather from your letter that, touched as always by anything that concerns the heart, you were anxious to protect the love affair of Jérôme and Natalie. Now there is every reason to suppose that these two, without consulting their fair protectress, have run away, after throwing Mathias de Gorne down a well.

"Forgive me for not coming to see you. The whole thing is extremely obscure; and, if I were near you, I should not have the detachment of mind which is needed to think the case over."

It was then half-past ten. Rénine went for a walk into the country, with his hands clasped behind his back and without vouchsafing a glance at the exquisite spectacle of the white meadows. He came back for lunch, still absorbed in his thought and indifferent to the talk of the customers of the inn, who on all sides were discussing recent events.

HE WENT up to his room and had been asleep some time when he was awakened by a tapping at the door. He got up and opened it.

"Is it you? . . . Is it you?" he whispered.

Hortense and he stood gazing at each other for some seconds in silence, holding each other's hands, as though nothing, no relevant thought and no utterance, must be allowed to interfere with the joy of their meeting. Then she asked:

"Was I right in coming?"

"Yes," he said, gently, "I expected you."

"Perhaps it would have been better if you had sent for me sooner, instead of waiting. . . . Events did not wait, you see, and I don't quite know what's to become of Jérôme Vignal and Natalie de Gorne."

"What, haven't you heard?" she said, quickly. "They've been arrested. They are going to travel by the express."

"Arrested? No," Rénine objected. "People are not arrested like that. They have to be questioned first."

"That's what's being done now. The authorities are making a search."

"Where?"

"At the château. And, as they are innocent. . . . For they are innocent, aren't they? You don't admit that they are guilty, any more than I do?"

He replied:

"I admit nothing, I can admit nothing, my dear. Nevertheless, I am bound to say that everything is against them. . . . Except one fact, which is that everything is too much against them. It is not normal for so many proofs to be heaped up on top of the other and for the man who commits a murder to tell his story so flunkily. Apart from this, there's nothing but mystery and discrepancy."

"Well?"

"Well, I am greatly puzzled."

"But you have a plan?"

"None at all, so far. Ah, if I could see Jérôme Vignal, and her, Natalie de Gorne, and hear them and know what they are saying in their own defence! But you understand that I shan't be permitted either to ask them any questions or to

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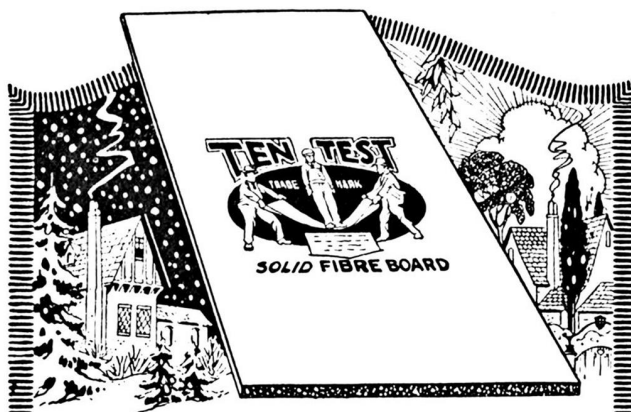
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be present at their examination. Besides, it must be finished by this time." "It's finished at the château," she said, "but it's going to be continued at the manor-house."

"Are they taking them to the manor-house?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes... at least, judging by what was said to the chauffeur of one of the procurator's two cars."

"Oh, in that case," exclaimed Rénine, "the thing's done! The manor-house! Why, we shall be in the front row of the stalls! We shall see and hear everything; and, as a word, a tone of the voice, a quiver of the eyelids will be enough to give me the tiny clue I need, we may entertain some hope. Come along."

HE TOOK her by the direct route which he had followed that morning, leading to the gate which the locksmith had opened. The gendarmes on duty at the manor house had made a passage through the snow, beside the line of footprints and around the house. Chance enabled Rénine and Hortense to approach unseen and through a side window to enter a corridor near a back-staircase. A few steps up was a little chamber which received its only light through a sort of bull's-eye from the large room on the ground-floor. Rénine, during the morning visit, had noticed the bull's-eye, which was covered on the inside with a piece of cloth. He removed the cloth and cut out one of the panes.

A few minutes later, a sound of voices rose from the other side of the house, no doubt near the well. The sound grew more distinct. A number of people flocked into the house. Some of them went upstairs to the first floor, while the sergeant arrived with a young man of whom Rénine and Hortense were able to distinguish only the tall figure: "Jérôme Vignal," said she.

"Yes," said Rénine, "they are examining Madame de Gorne first, upstairs, in her bedroom."

A quarter of an hour passed. Then the persons on the first floor came downstairs and went in. They were the procurator's deputy, his clerk, a commissary of police and two detectives.

Madame de Gorne was shown in and the deputy asked Jérôme Vignal to step forward.

Jérôme Vignal's face was certainly that of the strong man whom Hortense had depicted in her letter. He displayed no uneasiness, but rather decision and a resolute will. Natalie, who was short and very slight, with a feverish light in her eyes, nevertheless produced the same impression of quiet confidence.

THE DEPUTY, who was examining the disordered furniture and the traces of the struggle, invited her to sit down and said to Jérôme:

"Monsieur, I have not asked you many questions so far. This is a summary enquiry which I am conducting in your presence and which will be continued later by the examining-magistrate; and I wished above all to explain to you the very serious reasons for which I asked you to interrupt your journey and to come back here with Madame de Gorne. You are now in a position to refute the truly distressing charges that are hanging over you. I therefore ask you to tell me the exact truth."

"Mr. Deputy," replied Jérôme, "the charges in question trouble me very little. The... for which you are asking will defeat all the lies which chance has accumulated against me. It is this."

He reflected for an instant and then, in clear, frank tones, said:

"I love Madame de Gorne. The first time I met her, I conceived the greatest sympathy and admiration for her. But my affection has always been directed by the sole thought of her happiness. I love her, but I respect her even more. Madame de Gorne must have told you and I tell you again that she and I exchanged our first few words last night."

He continued, in a lower voice: "I respect her the more inasmuch as she is exceedingly unhappy. All the world knows that every minute of her life was a martyrdom. Her husband persecuted her with ferocious hatred and frantic jealousy. Ask the servants. They will tell you of the long suffering of Natalie de Gorne, of the blows which she received and the insults which she had to endure. I tried to stop this torture by resorting to the right of appeal which the merest stranger may claim when unhappiness and injustice pass a certain limit."

"I went three times to old de Gorne and begged him to interfere; but I found in him an almost equal hatred towards his daughter-in-law, the hatred which many people feel for anything beautiful and noble. At last I resolved on direct action and last night I took a step with regard to Mathias de Gorne which was... a little unusual, I admit, but which seemed likely to succeed, considering the man's character. I swear, Mr. Deputy, that I had no other intention than to talk to Mathias de Gorne. Knowing certain particulars of his life which enabled me to bring effective pressure to bear upon him, I wished to make use of this advantage in order to achieve my purpose. If things turned out differently, I am not wholly to blame... So I went there a little before nine o'clock. The servants, I knew, were out. He opened the door himself. He was alone."

"Monsieur," said the deputy, interrupting him, "you are saying something—as Madame de Gorne, for that matter, did just now—which is manifestly opposed to the truth. Mathias de Gorne did not come home last night until eleven o'clock. We have two definite proofs of this: his father's evidence and the prints of his feet in the snow, which fell from a quarter past nine o'clock to eleven."

"MR. DEPUTY," Jérôme Vignal declared, without heeding the bad effect which his obstinacy was producing, "I am relating things as they were and not as they may be interpreted. But to continue. That clock marked ten minutes to nine when I entered this room. M. de Gorne, believing that he was about to be attacked, had taken down his gun. I placed my revolver on the table, out of reach of my hand, and sat down: 'I want to speak to you, monsieur,' I said. 'Please listen to me.' He did not stir and did not utter a single syllable. So I spoke. And straightway, crudely, without any previous explanation which might have softened the bluntness of my proposal, I spoke the few words which I had prepared beforehand: 'I have spent some months, monsieur,' I said, 'in making careful enquiries into your financial position. You have mortgaged every foot of your land. You have signed bills which will shortly be falling due and which will be absolutely impossible for you to honor. You have nothing to hope for from your father, whose own affairs are in a very bad condition. So you are ruined. I have come to save you.'... He watched me, still without speaking, and sat down, which I took to mean that my suggestion was not entirely displeasing. Then I took a sheaf of bank-notes from my pocket, placed it before him and continued: 'Here are sixty thousand francs, monsieur. I will buy the Manor au-Puits, its lands and dependencies and take over the mortgages. The sum named is exactly twice what they are worth!' I saw his eyes glittering. He asked me conditions. 'Only one,' I said, 'that you go to America'.... Mr. Deputy, we were discussing for two hours. It was not my offer roused his indignation—I should not have risked it if I had not known whom I was dealing—but he wanted more and he haggled greedily, though he refrained from mentioning the name. Madame de Gorne, to whom I myself had not once alluded. We might have been two men engaged in a dispute and seeking an agreement on common ground, where it was the happiness and the whole destiny of a woman that were at stake. At last weary of the discussion, I accepted a compromise and we came to terms, which resolved to make definite then and there. Two letters were exchanged between us: one in which he made the Manor au-Puits over to me for the sum which I had paid him; and one, which he pocketed immediately, by which I was to send him as much more in America on the day on which the decree of divorce was pronounced.... So the affair was settled. I am sure that at that moment he was accepting in good faith. He looked upon me less as an enemy and a rival than as a man who was doing him a service. He even went so far as to give me the key of the little door which opened on the fields, so that I might go home by the short cut."

"Unfortunately, while I was picking up my cap and great-coat, I made the mistake of leaving on the table the letter of sale which he had signed. In a moment Mathias de Gorne had seen the advantage which he could take of my slip; he could keep his property, keep his wife... and keep the money. Quick as lightning, he

tucked away the paper, hit me over the head with the butt-end of his gun, threw the gun on the floor and seized me by the throat with both hands. He had reckoned without his host. I was the stronger of the two; and after a sharp but short struggle, I mastered him and tied him up with a cord which I found lying in a corner....Mr. Deputy, if my enemy's resolve was sudden, mine was no less so. Since, when all was said, he had accepted the bargain, I would force him to keep it, at least in so far as I was interested. A very few steps brought me to the first floor.... I had not a doubt that Madame de Gorne was there and had heard the sound of our discussion. Switching on the light of my pocket-torch, I looked into three bedrooms. The fourth was locked. I knocked at the door. There was no reply. But this was one of the moments in which a man allows no obstacle to stand in his way. I had seen a hammer in one of the rooms. I picked it up and smashed in the door.... Yes, Natalie was lying there, on the floor, in a dead faint. I took her in my arms, carried her downstairs and went out through the kitchen. On seeing the snow outside, I at once realized that my footprints would be easily traced. But what did it matter? Was there any reason why I should put Mathias de Gorne off the scent? Not at all. With the sixty thousand francs in his possession, as well as the paper in which I undertook to pay him a like sum on the day of his divorce, to say nothing of his house and land, he would go away, leaving Natalie de Gorne to me. Nothing was changed between us, except one thing, instead of awaiting his good pleasure, I had seized the precious pledge which I coveted. What I feared, therefore, was not so much any subsequent attack on the part of Mathias de Gorne, but rather the indignant reproaches of his wife. What would she say when she realized that she was a prisoner in my hands?... The reasons why I escaped reproach Madame de Gorne has, I believe, had the frankness to tell you. Love calls forth love. That night, in my house, broken by emotion, she confessed her feeling for me. She loved me as I loved her. Our destinies were thenceforth mingled. She and I set out at five o'clock this morning...not foreseeing for an instant that we were amenable to the law."

JEROME VIGNAL'S story was finished. He had told it straight off the reel, like a story learnt by heart and incapable of revision in any detail.

There was a brief pause, during which Hortense whispered:

"It all sounds quite possible and, in any case, very logical."

"There are the objections to come," said Rénine. "Wait till you hear them. They are very serious. There's one in particular..."

The deputy-procurator stated it at once: "And what became of M. de Gorne in all this?"

"Mathias de Gorne?" asked Jérôme. "Yes. You have related, with an accent of great sincerity, a series of facts which I am quite willing to admit. Unfortunately, you have forgotten a point of the first importance: what became of Mathias de Gorne? You tied him up here, in this room. Well, this morning he was gone."

"Of course, Mr. Deputy, Mathias de Gorne accepted the bargain in the end and went away."

"By what road?"

"No doubt by the road that leads to his father's house."

"Where are his footprints? The expanse of snow is an impartial witness. After your fight with him, we see you, on the snow, moving away. Why don't we see him? He came and did not go away again. Where is he? There is not a trace of him...or rather..."

The deputy lowered his voice:

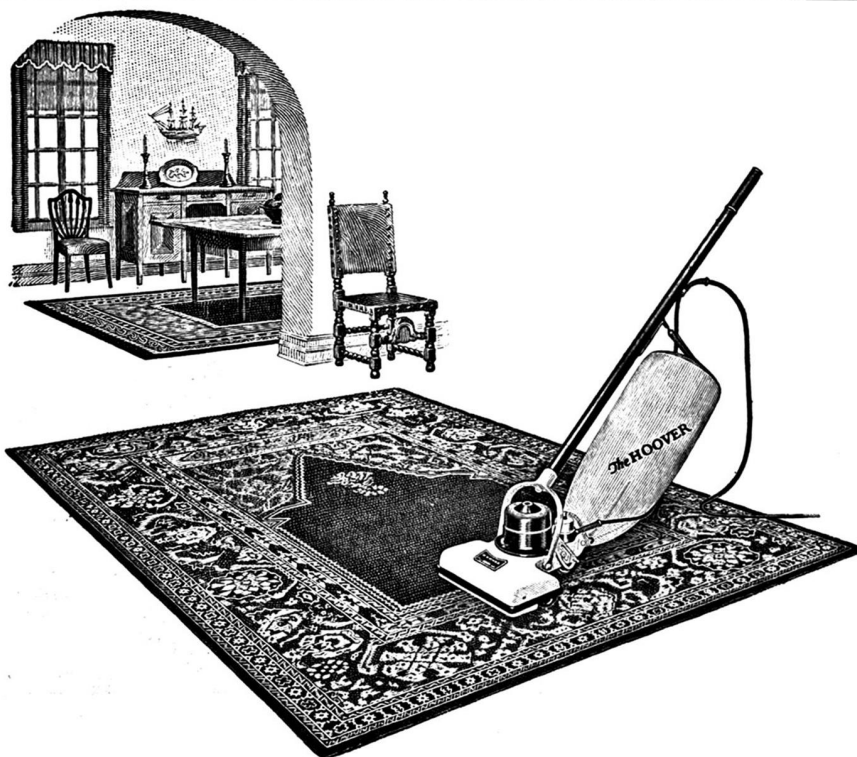
"Or rather, yes, there are some traces in the way to the well and around the well... traces which prove that the last struggle of all took place there.... And after that there is nothing...not a thing..."

Jérôme shrugged his shoulders: "You have already mentioned this, Mr. Deputy, and it implies a charge of homicide against me. I have nothing to say to..."

"Have you anything to say to the fact that your revolver was picked up within fifteen yards of the well?"

"No."

"Or to the strange coincidence between



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the three shots heard in the night and the three cartridges missing from your revolver?"

"No, Mr. Deputy, there was not, as you believe, a last struggle by the well, because I left M. de Gorne tied up, in this room, and because I also left my revolver here. On the other hand, if shots were heard, they were not fired by me."

"A casual coincidence, therefore?"

"That's a matter for the police to explain. My only duty is to tell the truth and you are not entitled to ask more of me."

"And if that truth conflicts with the facts observed?"

"It means that the facts are wrong, Mr. Deputy."

"As you please. But, until the day when the police are able to make them agree with your statements, you will understand that I am obliged to keep you under arrest."

"And Madame de Gorne?" asked Jérôme, greatly distressed.

THE DEPUTY did not reply. He exchanged a few words with the commissary of police and then, beckoning to a detective, ordered him to bring up one of the two motor-cars. Then he turned to Natalie:

"Madame, you have heard M. Vignal's evidence. It agrees word for word with your own. M. Vignal declares in particular that you had fainted when he carried you away. But did you remain unconscious all the way?"

It seemed as though Jérôme's composure had increased Madame de Gorne's assurance. She replied:

"I did not come to, monsieur, until I was at the château."

"It's most extraordinary. Didn't you hear the three shots which were heard by almost every one in the village?"

"I did not."

"And did you see nothing of what happened beside the well?"

"Nothing did happen. M. Vignal has told you so."

"Then what has become of your husband?"

"I don't know."

"Come, madame, you really must assist the officers of the law and at least tell us what you think. Do you believe that there may have been an accident and that possibly M. de Gorne, who had been to see his father and had had more to drink than usual, lost his balance and fell into the well?"

"When my husband came back from seeing his father, he was not in the least intoxicated."

"His father, however, has stated that he was. His father and he had drunk two or three bottles of wine."

"His father is not telling the truth."

"But the snow tells the truth, madame," said the deputy, irritably. "And the line of his footprints wavers from side to side."

"My husband came in at half-past eight, monsieur, before the snow had begun to fall."

The deputy struck the table with his fist:

"But, really, madame, you're going right against the evidence! ... That sheet of snow cannot speak false! ... I may accept your denial of matters that cannot be verified. But these footprints in the snow... in the snow..."

He controlled himself.

THE MOTOR-CAR drew up outside the windows. Forming a sudden resolve, he said to Natalie:

"You will be good enough to hold yourself at the disposal of the authorities, madame, and to remain here, in the manor-house..."

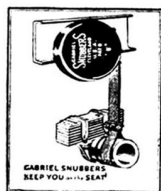
And he made a sign to the sergeant to remove Jérôme Vignal in the car.

The game was lost for the two lovers. Barely united, they had to separate and to fight, far away from each other, against the most grievous accusations.

Jérôme took a step towards Natalie. They exchanged a long, sorrowful look. Then he bowed to her and walked to the door, in the wake of the sergeant of gendarmes.

"Halt," cried a voice. "Sergeant, right about...turn!... Jérôme Vignal, stay where you are!"

The ruffled deputy raised his head, as did the other people present. The voice came from near the ceiling. The bull's-eye window had opened and Rénine, leaning through it, was waving his arms: "I wish to be heard!... I have several



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remarks to make...especially in respect of the zigzag footprints... It all lies in that!..... Mathias had not been drinking!"

He had turned round and put his two legs through the opening, saying to Hortense, who tried to prevent him:

"Don't move No one will disturb you."

And, releasing his hold, he dropped into the room.

The deputy appeared dumfounded:

"But, really, monsieur, who are you? Where do you come from?"

Rénine brushed the dust from his clothes and replied:

"Excuse me, Mr. Deputy. I ought to have come the same way as everybody else. But I was in a hurry. Besides, if I had come in by the door instead of falling from the ceiling, my words would not have made the same impression."

The infuriated deputy advanced to meet him:

"Who are you?"

"Prince Répine. I was with the sergeant this morning when he was pursuing his investigations, wasn't I, sergeant? Since then I have been hunting about for information. That's why, wishing to be present at the hearing, I found a corner in a little private room"

"You were there? You had the audacity?"

"One must needs be audacious, when the truth's at stake. If I had not been there, I should not have discovered just the one little clue which I missed. I should not have known that Mathias de Gorne was not the least bit drunk. Now that's the key to the riddle. When we know that, we know the solution."

THE DEPUTY found himself in a rather ridiculous position. Since he had failed to take the necessary precautions to ensure the secrecy of his enquiry, it was difficult for him to take any steps against this interloper. He growled:

"Let's have done with this. What are you asking?"

"A few minutes of your kind attention."

"And with what object?"

"To establish the innocence of M. Vignal and Madame de Gorne."

He was wearing that calm air, that sort of indifferent look which was peculiar to him in moments of action when the crisis of the drama depended solely upon himself. Hortense felt a thrill pass through her and at once became full of confidence:

"They're saved," she thought, with a sudden emotion. "I asked him to protect that young creature; and he is saving her from prison and despair."

Jérôme and Natalie must have experienced the same impression of sudden hope, for they had drawn nearer to each other, as though this stranger, descended from the clouds, had already given them the right to clasp hands.

The deputy shrugged his shoulders:

"The prosecution will have every means, when the time comes, of establishing their innocence for itself. You will be called."

"It would be better to establish it here and now. Any delay might lead to grievous consequences."

"I happen to be in a hurry."

"Two or three minutes will do."

"Two or three minutes to explain a case like this?"

"No longer, I assure you."

"Are you as certain of it as all that?"

"I am now. I have been thinking hard since this morning."

The deputy realized that this was one of those gentry who stick to you like a leech and that there was nothing for it but to submit. In a rather bantering tone, he asked:

"Does your thinking enable you to tell us the exact spot where M. Mathias de Gorne is at this moment?"

Rénine took out his watch and answered:

"In Paris, Mr. Deputy."

"In Paris? Alive then?"

"Alive and, what is more, in the pink of health."

"I am delighted to hear it. But then what's the meaning of the footprints around the well and the presence of that revolver and those three shots?"

"Simply camouflage."

"Oh, really? Camouflage contrived by whom?"

"By Mathias de Gorne himself."

"That's curious! And with what object?"

"With the object of passing himself off for dead and of arranging subsequent matters in such a way that M. Vignal was

bound to be accused of the death, the murderer."

"An ingenious theory," the deputy agreed, still in a satirical tone. "What do you think of it, M. Vignal?"

"It is a theory which flashed through my own mind, Mr. Deputy," replied Jérôme. "It is quite likely that, after our struggle and after I had gone, Mathias de Gorne conceived a new plan by which, this time, his hatred would be fully gratified. He both loved and detested his wife. He held me in the greatest loathing. This must be his revenge."

"His revenge would cost him dear, considering that, according to your statement, Mathias de Gorne was to receive a second sum of sixty thousand francs from you."

"He would receive that sum in another quarter, Mr. Deputy. My examination of the financial position of the de Gorne family revealed to me the fact that the father and son had taken out a life-policy in each other's favour. With the son dead, or passing for dead, the father would receive the insurance-money and indemnify his son."

"You mean to say," asked the deputy, with a smile, "that in all this camouflage, as you call it, M. de Gorne the elder would act as his son's accomplice?"

Rénine took up the challenge:

"Just so, Mr. Deputy. The father and son are accomplices."

"Then we shall find the son at the father's?"

"You would have found him there last night."

"What became of him?"

"He took the train at Pompignat."

"That's a mere supposition."

"No, a certainty."

"A moral certainty, perhaps, but you'll admit there's not the slightest proof."

THE DEPUTY did not wait for a reply. He considered that he had displayed an excessive good-will and that patience has its limits and he put an end to the interview:

"Not the slightest proof," he repeated, taking up his hat. "And, above all.... above all, there's nothing in what you've said that can contradict in the very least the evidence of that relentless witness the snow. To go to his father, Mathias de Gorne must have left the house. Which way did he go?"

"Hang it all, M. Vignal told you: by the road which leads from here to his father's!"

"There are no tracks in the snow."

"Yes, there are."

"But they show him coming here and not going away from here."

"It's the same thing."

"What?"

"Of course it is. There's more than one way of walking. One doesn't always go ahead by following one's nose."

"In what other way can one go ahead?"

"By walking backwards, Mr. Deputy."

These few words, spoken very simply, but in a clear tone which gave full value to every syllable, produced a profound silence. Those present at once grasped their extreme significance and, by adapting it to the actual happenings, perceived in a flash the impenetrable truth, which suddenly appeared to be the most natural thing in the world.

Rénine continued his argument. Stepping backwards in the direction of the window, he said:

"If I want to get to that window, I can of course walk straight up to it; but I can just as easily turn my back to it and walk that way. In either case I reach my goal."

And he at once proceeded in a vigorous tone:

"Here's the gist of it all. At half-past eight, before the snow fell, M. de Gorne comes home from his father's house. M. Vignal arrives twenty minutes later. There is a long discussion and a struggle, taking up three hours in all. It is then, after M. Vignal has carried off Madame de Gorne and made his escape, that Mathias de Gorne, foaming at the mouth, wild with rage, but suddenly seeing his chance of taking the most terrible revenge, hits upon the ingenious idea of using against his enemy the very snowfall upon whose evidence you are now relying. He therefore plans his own murder or rather the appearance of his murder and of his fall to the bottom of the well, and makes off backwards, step by step, thus recording his arrival instead of his departure on the white page."

The deputy sneered no longer. This eccentric intruder suddenly appeared to him in the light of a person worthy of attention, whom it would not do to make fun of. He asked:

"And how could he have left his father's house?"

"In a trap, quite simply."

"Who drove it?"

"The father. This morning the sergeant and I saw the trap and spoke to the father, who was going to market as usual. The son was hidden under the cover. He took the train at Pompignat and is in Paris by now."

Rénine's explanation, as promised, had taken hardly five minutes. He had based it solely on logic and the probabilities of the case. And yet not a jot was left of the distressing mystery in which they were floundering. The darkness was dispelled. The whole truth appeared.

Madame de Gorne wept for joy and Jérôme Vignal thanked the good genius who was changing the course of events with a stroke of his magic wand.

"Shall we examine those footprints together, Mr. Deputy?" asked Répine.

"Do you mind? The mistake which the sergeant and I made this morning was to investigate only the footprints left by the alleged murderer and to neglect Mathias de Gorne's. Why indeed should they have attracted our attention? Yet it was precisely there that the crux of the whole affair was to be found."

They stepped into the orchard and went to the well. It did not need a long examination to observe that many of the footprints were awkward, hesitating, too deeply sunk at the heel and toe and differing from one another in the angle at which the feet were turned.

"This clumsiness was unavoidable," said Répine. "Mathias de Gorne would have needed a regular apprenticeship before his backward progress could have equalled his ordinary gait; and both his father and he must have been aware of this, at least as regards the zigzags which you see here, since old de Gorne went out of his way to tell the sergeant that his son had had too much to drink." And he added, "Indeed it was the detection of this falsehood that suddenly enlightened me. When Madame de Gorne stated that her husband was not drunk, I thought of the footprints and guessed the truth."

The deputy frankly accepted his part in the matter and began to laugh:

"There's nothing left for it but to send detectives after the bogus corpse."

"On what grounds, Mr. Deputy?" asked Répine. "Mathias de Gorne has committed no offence against the law. There's nothing criminal in trampling the soil around a well, in shifting the position of a revolver that doesn't belong to you,

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in firing three shots or in walking backwards to one's father's house. What can we ask of him? The sixty thousand francs? I presume that this is not M. Vignal's intention and that he does not mean to bring a charge against him?"

"Certainly not," said Jérôme.

"Well, what then? The insurance-policy in favour of the survivor? But there would be no misdemeanor unless the father claimed payment. And I should be greatly surprised if he did....Hullo, here the old chap is! You'll soon know all about it."

Old de Gorne was coming along, gesticulating as he walked. His easy-going features were screwed up to express sorrow and anger.

"Where's my son?" he cried. "It seems the brute's killed him!... My poor Mathias dead! Oh, that scoundrel of a Vignal!"

And he shook his fist at Jérôme.

THE DEPUTY said, bluntly:

"A word with you, M. de Gorne. Do you intend to claim your rights under a certain insurance-policy?"

"Well, what do you think?" said the old man, off his guard.

"The fact is ... your son's not dead. People are even saying that you were a partner in his little schemes and that you stuffed him under the tilt of your trap and drove him to the station."

The old fellow spat on the ground, stretched out his hand as though he were going to take a solemn oath, stood for an instant without moving and then, suddenly changing his mind and his tactics with ingenious cynicism, he relaxed his features, assumed a conciliatory attitude and burst out laughing:

"That blackguard Mathias! So he tried to pass himself off as dead? What a rascal! And he reckoned on me to collect the insurance-money and send it to him? As if I should be capable of such a low, dirty trick! ... You don't know me, my boy!"

And, without waiting for more, shaking with merriment like a jolly old fellow amused by a funny story, he took his departure, not forgetting, however, to set his great hob-nailed boots on each of the compromising footprints which his son had left behind him.

Later, when Répine went back to the manor to let Hortense out, he found that she had disappeared.

He called and asked for her at her cousin Ermelin's. Hortense sent down word asking him to excuse her: she was feeling a little tired and was lying down.

"Capital!" thought Répine. "Capital! She avoids me, therefore she loves me. The end is not far off."

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